Philadelphia hosts school choice program

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A local charter school administrator had a provocative message for parents this week at a seminar on school choice.

“Parents who allow their children to stay in failing schools, they are the villains,” according to David Hardy, who oversees academic programs at the Boys’ Latin of Philadelphia Charter School. He is also a spokesman for PhillySchoolChoice.com.

“They need to be called out and chastised,” Hardy said during a panel discussion on school choice hosted on Thursday by the National Constitution Center.

He urged parents dissatisfied with their child’s school to take immediate action rather than wait to find down time during summer vacation. Alternate plans include transferring to private school or relocating to an area served by a school district outside the city.

In introductory remarks, Bob Bowdon, executive director of event sponsor Choice Media, addressed the public perception charter schools are siphoning students away from traditional public schools that have suffered from negative public perception. Locally, officials said far too often struggling or failing schools are kept afloat.

Bowdon pointed to statistics showing public school enrollment is on a 10-year decline, suggesting families are choosing alternatives.

“Choice and quality is not synonymous. If we’re serious about providing access to school choice for students most in need, we’ve got to provide more school choice,” Bowdon said.

After a screening of the documentary “The Ticket,” he presented a line chart showing 11 percent of Philadelphia charter schools performing in the 80th percentile or better on standardized reading and math exams, compared to three percent of traditional public schools. The chart also showed 25

percent of public charter schools scoring in the 60th and 79th percentile, in comparison to 14 percent of traditional public schools.

The state average is 72 percent.

Other panelists featured included Ina Lipman, executive director of Children’s Scholarship Fund Philadelphia; James Paul, education policy analyst at the Commonwealth Foundation; and Mike Wang, managing director of the Philadelphia School Partnership, which solicits private donations for investment in school improvement projects. The panelist found fault with the current education system, saying academically struggling schools still receive significant funding.

“We’ve got to do a better job of spending our money on things that are working well rather than propping up things that aren’t,” Wang said.

Lipman said parent engagement is a critical issue because apathy can set in for parents who don’t feel empowered to act on their own behalf.

“It’s up to us to show them the path out politically, how to get empowered,” she said.

Local officials also noted options for quality neighborhood schools are limited for far too many families.

“However, there are still many children trapped in failing schools across Pennsylvania and the nation,” said Otto Banks, executive director of REACH Alliance.


National School Choice Week is a very public salute to quality schools that demonstrate success in preparing students for college and the workforce with high graduation rates, create a culture of achievement embraced by students and school staff, result in high test scores, have fewer disciplinary problems and encourage internships or summer job experiences that help students develop marketable skills. The nonpolitical, nonpartisan movement is gaining momentum across the country from supporters who rank quality higher in importance than school type.

For the first time, the U.S. Senate has recognized school choice week with a resolution, and school choice events are planned at no fewer than 15 state capitol buildings. Monday in Harrisburg, former Philadelphia Eagles running back Ricky Watters, Speaker of the House Mike Turzai and Democrat Jake Wheatley all are scheduled to make an appearance in support of school choice. Events range from open houses, pep rallies, round-table discussions on educational policies, and movie screenings, said Andrew Campanella, president of the National School Choice Week.

“Rather than send a national top-down message about school choice, let’s encourage people in local communities to encourage parents to talk about education and all opportunities available there,”
Campanella said during last week’s conference call.

Gripes over which education model is best has created tensions and divisions in school communities across the country, Philadelphia included. Traditional public schools are facing greater competition from a steadily growing number of privately managed public charter schools, as well as magnet schools with a specific educational theme, in addition to private schools, online learning and home-schooling.